DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 609 CS 002 695

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TITLE Considerations in Devising Evaluative Factors.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (21st, Anaheim, California, May 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Environment; *Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; *Instructional Materials; Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; *Textbook Selection

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses six factors which can be used to successfully examine, evaluate, and select reading instructional materials; it also examines the appropriate characteristics of an objective evaluation instrument. Evaluation of reading instructional materials should be based on a sound philosophy of reading instruction as practiced in the school district; take into consideration the intellectual, social, oral, and legal standards of community and state; utilize all available information regarding the construction and effectiveness of materials being considered; be both subjective and objective; and deal primarily with instructional design characteristics, and only secondarily with physical characteristics. Evaluation instruments should be objective, contain descriptions to reinforce ratings, utilize multi-point rating scales, and provide mechanisms for comparison with subjective ratings. (TS)

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Considerations in Devising Evaluative Factors

to be presented during the symposium

Establishing an Objective Instrument for Evaluation of Reading Instructional Materials

Thursday, May 13, 1976

Twenty First Annual Convention --- International Reading Association
Anaheim, California --- May 10-14, 1976

CS002 695

Considerations in Devising Evaluative Factors

Selection of reading instructional materials for use in an elementary school program is crucial to the success of that program. Carefully selected materials will be appreciated and used constructively by teachers.

There are many factors which can be used to successfully examine, evaluate, and select reading instructional materials. Six of these will be discussed here. There will also be discussion of appropriate characteristics of an objective evaluation instrument and of the role of such an instrument in the evaluation-selection process.

Obviously the final, and perhaps the only, determination of the effectiveness of materials will come after a period of use. While school districts may find it impractical and expensive to evaluate all available materials through a year's use, they should not disregard this avenue entirely. To show that comparative evaluation is possible, Murray (2) adopted two linguistic phonic programs for use with groups of middlegrade students chosen for similarity in reading difficulty, age, and in socioeconomic characteristics, and randomly assigned to treatment. He was able to make conclusions about the overall effectiveness of the two programs and about their specific effectiveness when used by various subgroups.

Although such summative evaluation may not be possible as a preliminary testing of materials' effectiveness, post-adoption testing can be done. Analysis of the effectiveness of a program after a year or so

of use should be a verification of the original selection. If the materials have been chosen carefully, they will reflect school and community standards and the program should be effective and should be accepted positively.

Most instructional materials selection is accomplished by school committee. The committee may act independently or be part of a larger district wide committee. It may also be acting only on materials already screened by a state selection committee. Whatever the context, the goal of a reading textbook selection committee is to find and recommend the most effective materials available for teaching reading to a given group of students. To accomplish this task, the committee must take into account both objective and subjective information regarding the student population to be served, teacher styles and preferences, established school philosophy and goals, community laws and standards, and publisher's claims for their materials. All of this information must be weighed as evidence against an objective analysis of the actual content and methodology of materials. The final decision should indicate that the preferred materials are of a style and quality which should make them successful in the hands of teachers and students for whom they were chosen. The evaluative factors which we will consider here are intended for consideration by school personnel as they charge such committees and by the committees themselves as they carry out their tasks.

Evaluation of reading instructional materials should be based on a sound philosophy of reading instruction as practiced in the school (district). The first task of the school selection committee is that of determining just what is expected of reading instructional materials.

In schools where teachers believe in strong phonics based skill development programs materials having these attributes will be appropriate while others might not. To state a philosophy of reading instruction requires care and a willingness to ammend as ideas and teachers change. However difficult, such a statement is needed. The whole purpose of evaluating materials is to find those which best suit the methods and likes of teachers and students who will use them. Therefore, establishment of a school philosophy is the essential first step in executing such a match.

Evaluation of reading instructional materials should take into consideration the intellectual, social, moral, and legal standards of community and state. Schools do not operate in vacuums. They are part of the lives of communities. Therefore, other aspects of community life become important when school decisions are being made. By taking into account the prevailing attitudes and culture of a community, an evaluation committee can seek out appropriate materials and simultaneously avoid conflict which might damage school-community relations.

This is not to suggest that schools should acquiesce to narrow, unimaginative, perhaps prejudiced community views. The school can be an uplifting force through methods, materials, and example. But efforts to lead the community in new directions will be more likely to succeed if they are based on knowledge of the community's original position.

Evaluation of reading instructional materials should utilize all available information regarding the construction and effectiveness of materials being considered. Information about materials can and should

be solicited from whatever sources available. Publishers base the construction of their materials on a philosophy of instruction which they will communicate to interested school personnel. They conduct pilot studies of materials before they are released for publication. They also conduct field tests of the effectiveness of completed materials. Publishers are able to provide evidence of materials' effectiveness in test situations, whether conducted by their evaluators or by independent experimenters. Other schools (districts) which use materials can provide information about effectiveness and subjective information regarding teacher and student satisfaction. The teachers who will actually use selected materials will have personal feelings about what they want and what they see in proposed materials. Because they have an important interest in materials the teachers are the obvious people to help make objective ratings on items which the evaluation committee has decided are important to school philosophy. Representatives of community interests can offer suggestions, subjective reactions, and perhaps some objective ratings on items they deem essential.

The contributions of all of these people are important to the overall evaluation effort. To give them maximum impact, they should be considered to be interrelated segments, complementing and sometimes overlapping each other. The committee's function is to call on each of these groups and to coordinate and make maximum use of their efforts.

Evaluation has both subjective and objective characteristics. Both types should be utilized, but they should not be confused. As the committee determines and/or ammends its statements of school philosophy and community standards, it should simultaneously separate objective from subjective items. The objective items can become the

basis for an evaluative instrument which can be used to determine just what characterizes proposed materials. The subjective items can provide a sounding board against which to measure results of objective evaluation.

The importance of distinguishing objective from subjective information should be emphasized. Appraisal of most available evaluation instruments shows a confusion of subjective and objective items, making clear decisions about materials difficult if not impossible.

Evaluation should deal primarily with instructional design characteristics, and only secondarily with physical characteristics. In a 1974 report (1) entitled Selecting and Evaluating Beginning Reading Materials, the Educational Products Information Exchange (EPIE) suggests that reading instructional materials should be evaluated on items related to the following instructional design criteria: goals, content (including scope and sequence and subject matter), methodology, and assessment.

The selection committee should certainly concern itself with these four areas of instructional design in evaluating materials. It may want to use them also in establishing its statements of school and community philosophy and standards. By so doing the goals, content, methodology, and assessment aspects of a set of reading materials can be evaluated against those of school and community.

One aspect of instructional materials not included here is that of physical characteristics. While this omission should not be taken to mean that quality of binding and style of pictures are unimportant,

it does mean that such things are of considerably less importance than are the instructional design aspects discussed above. Physical characteristics are obvious and too easily become the focal point of selection. Committees should see that selections are made on the basis of the more essential aspects of goals, content, methodology, and assessment.

Evaluation instruments should be objective, contain descriptions to reinforce ratings, utilize multi-point rating scales, and provide mechanisms for comparison with subjective ratings.

An examination of evaluation instruments with which most educators are familiar are in no way equal to the task. The simplest of them amount to little more than yes-no responses to general and often trivial items such as Is the print large enough? Are pictures appealing? Is the skill development program adequate? After making responses on instruments of this kind, teachers must still base decisions on idiosyncratic judgement of their own likes and dislikes. In fact, most evaluation instruments serve to cloud vision by requiring subjective responses. Teachers could probably do equally well to operate on their likes and dislikes from the start.

One important effort to generate an evaluation instrument which would separate subjective from objective reactions was reported by O'Brien (3), who asked evaluators to react to the importance of each item as they determined whether it was represented in a given program Evaluators checked a criterion column if they considered an item important and a judgement column if they found the item present in the materials. For each criterion-judgement match, the materials were

awarded a point. Additional points could be awarded at the discretion of the evaluator.

The O'Brien instrument represents a step forward by separating objective and subjective judgements. However, the method of checking only the presence or absence of an item and only the worthiness or unworthiness of a criterion remains a black-white technique. Both criterion and judgement decisions are made by the same person, leaving no opportunity for teacher interaction or for community involvement. Since criterion and judgement ratings are made alternately by the evaluator, inconsistencies might arise from possible confusion caused by the switching.

The important concept in the O'Brien instrument is the dual rating system. Used by committees interacting with teachers and community representatives, such a system would allow for objective decisions about materials' actual value and for subjective decisions about the compatibility of the material with school philosophy and goals and with community standards. It would allow committees to determine relative importance of all aspects of the evaluation and to base final choices on evaluation of materials against the weighted scale. It would allow teachers to take part in materials' selection while learning a great deal about materials being considered.

One attribute which should be added to the instrument is a multi-point rating scale. A yes/no scale forces decisions based on dichotomies rather than on the sublteties we know to be present in instructional materials. One way to allow for inclusion of sublteties of judgement would be to use five point rating scales for teachers making

judgements about what a set of materials delivers and for committee members making judgements about the degree to which a set of materials is compatible with school and community standards. Another way would be to allow the committee to assign weights to the various items listed under instructional design criteria. As inclusion of each item in a set of materials is rated objectively, so is its importance in the subjective context of school and community.

When the evaluation instrument is ready, the committee must determine how it will be used. Since the instrument was designed with school and community goals and standards in mind, it includes subjective criteria against which to examine materials. Therefore, the instrument can be used for restatement of school-community priorities, objective evaluation of materials contents, and objective evaluation of publishers claims and research information. While the committee is in the best position to restate priorities and to examine research, it may want to encourage interaction with teachers and publishers to conduct objective analyses of materials. Possible contributions of teachers and publishers have already been discussed.

In summary, the examination and selection of reading instructional materials is an essential and complex task. Statements of school and community standards should form a basis for evaluation. Information collected from publishers, teachers, community, and research should be considered. Primary emphasis should be placed on essential instructional design characteristics. Instruments used in evaluation should be objective and allow for comparison with subjective ratings.

Attention to the evaluative factors considered above should insure selection of materials appropriate to specific situations, and should promote effective reading instruction. However, it must be noted that the best possible materials' selection process will not insure teacher effectiveness or compensate for poor teaching. Instructional materials are only the tangible, inanimate aids which teachers employ. The quality of utilization of materials will finally decide the question of effective reading instruction.

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